

William R. Cotter Federal Building

135 High Street
Hartford, CT

The William R. Cotter Federal Building is an excellent example of Neoclassical architecture. The architects adopted traditional classical architectural forms while abandoning excessive interior ornament in favor of Art Deco's more stylized decorative components. The building conveys the federal government's dignity and stability, an ideology that was particularly important during the Great Depression.

Public Transportation: CT Transit Bus Service, Amtrak Train Station, and taxis.

Parking: There are several parking lots and garages within walking distance of the building.

Concessions: There are several restaurants and coffee shops within a few blocks of the building.

Landmark Status: Listed in the National Register of Historic Places



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Exterior

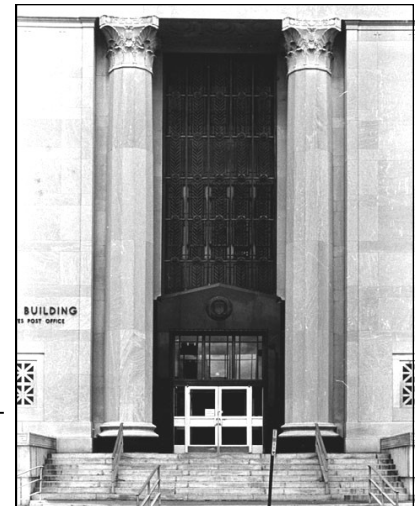
The three-story federal building is situated on a trapezoidal block bounded by High and South Church streets and Foot Guard and Hoadley places in downtown Hartford. The building fills the entire block with its irregular footprint. However, a light court occupies the second and third stories, admitting natural light into the interior. The exterior has remained largely intact since the building's completion in 1933.

The steel-frame building rests on a granite foundation. The exterior is faced with Indiana limestone panels. The facade, which faces High Street, consists of a three-story central block flanked by pavilions. Limestone pilasters separate each bay on the central section, which features a projecting cornice topped with decorative cresting. Aluminum spandrels divide each story's casement windows, and spandrels between the first and second stories contain American eagle motifs. Simple recessed panels separate the second and third stories. Projecting pavilions, each containing two modified, Corinthian columns, frame the two principal entrances located at each end of the High Street elevation. Wisconsin black marble surrounds the entryways. A curved terrace, enclosed by a granite-and-iron balustrade, stretches between the granite entrance steps. Armillary spheres, representing celestial order, are located at each end of the balustrade.

A frieze above the facade's third story bears a six-line, two-part inscription that alludes to postal service duties. The quotation is divided by low-relief figures on horse-back transferring a message, recalling the Pony Express and early postal delivery methods. Aluminum eagles with up-lifted wings perch at each end of the cornice.

Situated on the trapezoidal block bounded by High and Church Streets and Hoadley and Foot Guard Places, the William R. Cotter Federal Building fills the entire block at the basement and first floors, then reduces at the second and third floors to a U-shape with its base along High Street. The exterior remains largely intact, with the exception of the sash replacement in 1988. The interior on the other hand has been stripped of almost all historic finishes except corridors, lobbies, and stairhalls. The exterior retains a number of unique Art Deco-style elements in aluminum, which came into use in the 1920s and 1930s. Aluminum is used extensively for both decorative and functional features. The significant exterior features fashioned of cast aluminum include decorative window screens, window sash, doors, anthemion antifixae and acroteria in the form of eagles.

Two principal entrances, distinguished by massive surrounds of Wisconsin black marble, are located at either end of the High Street facade, flanked by semi-engaged columns, and framed in projecting pavilions. Between entry pavilions are granite piers which separate eleven bays of windows, joined by aluminum spandrel panels. The effect is a three-story colonnade, topped by a tall fascia with relief carvings of messengers on horseback and an inscription. The Church Street and Foot Guard Place elevations repeat the colonnade format. Faced with light gray granite up to the first story level and with Indiana limestone above it, the exterior is classically organized, though with modern details.



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Interior

Interior spaces are richly ornamented. On the first floor, a principal corridor connects two main lobbies. The lobbies and corridor have their original black terrazzo flooring inlaid with decorative borders and patterns. Most notably, one panel contains Hartford's symbol, which is a hart, or stag, crossing water. Flat panels of polished, Ross Curley Gray Tennessee marble cover the walls and are placed above a red marble base. The first-floor vaulted ceiling is painted blue with metallic gold stars. Aluminum, half-spherical and pendant light fixtures descend from the ceiling. Stylized ornamentation includes chevrons and Greek key patterns.

The corridor contains original, Art Deco-style, interior finishes. Each end of the corridor floor is inset with a brass-and-terrazzo panel with an envelope motif. Pairs of engaged black marble columns with aluminum ribs and stylized Doric capitals flank two murals at each end of the corridor. The murals, painted in 1934 by the Barker Painting Company of New York, depict the eastern and western hemispheres. A decorative frieze lines the top of the corridor walls. The corridor ceiling contains recessed, framed beams bearing medallions with depictions of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln.

The two original stairs are adjacent to the two first-floor elevator lobbies. The stairs are comprised of black soapstone treads and a decorative, aluminum railing. In select locations, the building contains original three-paneled, aluminum doors decorated with stars.

The first story plan follows the postal department design constraint of allowing the largest floor area for the mail workroom. This room consisted of a large open space lit by three large skylights and crisscrossed by a system of "lookout galleries" through which supervisors could monitor the performance of workers. Once fronted by an elaborate public lobby with service windows, the windows and also mail slots on the west side of the main corridor were filled in with salvaged marble to match the originals. This first floor central corridor remains the most elaborately finished design. The second and third stories follow the U-plan around the open space above the workroom, and in general contained offices opening off double-loaded corridors. The second story housed a variety of programs, while the third story was assigned to the courts with offices for a judge, attorneys, and clerks, a grand jury room and library. The major room on this floor was the two-story courtroom, centered on the rear of the main corridor; this room was stripped of all finishes and subdivided in 1978 following the removal of court functions from the building. A concrete floor was also installed at the upper level to accommodate a new mechanical equipment room to occupy the partial fourth floor.

Also with the removal of the court functions, fixed and moveable partitions were installed to divide many of the larger office spaces. The first story workroom was altered by the removal of the three aluminum skylights, installation of a drop ceiling, and the partitioning of the large open work space. The basement was also radically altered by the removal and addition of partitions. Air conditioners were also installed in many windows.

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With the removal of the Post Office functions in 1964, the "look-out" galleries in the rear workroom space were partially removed and the work spaces on High Street were repartitioned. At this time the service windows and mail slots were filled in. Changes on other stories at this time affected primarily the stairs and washroom facilities. Other alterations included the renovation of the second floor offices for use by the IRS in 1981. Also new oil burners were installed in 1982 along with a basement level health unit and cafeteria, as well as new windows in 1988.

Overall the only spaces retaining significant quantities of original materials are corridors, stairwells, and washrooms. Alterations over the years have left the exterior intact, but drastically changed the spatial organization and ornamental finishes of the interior. Although the principal lobbies and corridors retain significant original terrazzo flooring, metalwork, decorative painting and light fixtures, all office areas, which are removed from public view and contain no significant historic detail, have been renovated. Original partition locations have been moved, and acoustic tile ceilings have been installed. The original skylights above the first floor level have been largely blocked off, and the third floor courtroom has been removed and no traces of it can be found above the dropped ceilings.

Although the federal building has accommodated various functions, it has been continuously occupied since its completion. However, these changes in use resulted in major interior renovations. Most notably, galleries and other postal features were removed when the spaces were transformed into office areas. The corridors, stairwells, and bathrooms retain historic features and finishes.

www.gsa.gov



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History

In 1636, a group of English settlers departed Massachusetts and formed a colony centered on the Dutch trading post known as House of Hope. The town, which was renamed Hartford, soon became an important trading center on the Connecticut River. It eventually became the capital of Connecticut, prospering as a result of the social and economic forces that gave rise to industrial growth in America.

In 1882, the federal government completed construction of Hartford's first permanent post office building. By the 1920s, however, Hartford residents were campaigning for a new postal building to replace the overcrowded Second Empire-style structure. In 1928, the government selected a site for the new building, and two years later contracted the local architectural firm of Malmfeldt, Adams, & Prentice to design the building. Although the Public Buildings Act of 1926 authorized the Office of the Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury to hire private architects to design federal buildings, the Hartford project was one of the few times that the act was actually invoked.

Construction commenced in 1931. On April 14, 1932, citizens and officials gathered for a cornerstone laying ceremony, and construction was completed the following year. The new building originally served as a post office, courthouse, and office building. It is one of Hartford's most notable examples of the Neoclassical architectural style, which was commonly used for public buildings during the early twentieth century. Architectural Forum cited the building as an example for private architects to follow when completing Public Works Administration commissions.

Major interior renovations to the federal building occurred in 1964 and 1978 after the courts and post office vacated the location. In 1982, the federal government renamed the building to honor Congressman William R. Cotter, who represented the First District of Connecticut from 1971 until his death in 1981. The building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1981 and currently houses various federal offices.

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William Ross Cotter (1926-1981), a Representative from Connecticut; born in Hartford, Conn., July 18, 1926; attended the Hartford public schools; B.A., Trinity College, Hartford, Conn., 1949; member, court of common council, city of Hartford, 1953; aide to Gov. Abraham Ribicoff, 1955-1957; deputy insurance commissioner, State of Connecticut, 1957-1964, and insurance commissioner, 1964-1970; delegate to Connecticut State Democratic conventions, 1954-1970; delegate to Democratic National Conventions, 1964, 1968; elected as a Democrat to the Ninety-second and to the five succeeding Congresses and served from January 3, 1971, until his death in East Lyme, Conn., September 8, 1981; was a resident of Hartford, Conn.; interment in Mount Saint Benedict Cemetery, Bloomfield, Conn.

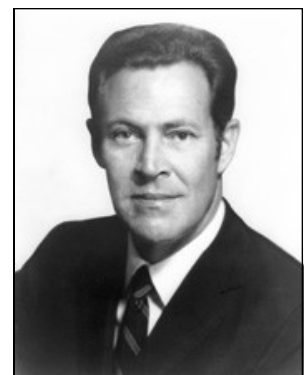
Biographical Data courtesy of the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress.



An antique postcard.



An early photo of the William R. Cotter Federal Building



William R. Cotter